

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Maiden speech made by HEIDI ALEXANDER, MP

during the ECONOMIC AFFAIRS AND WORK AND PENSIONS DEBATE

(Hansard 8 June 2010)

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am very grateful for the chance to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the many hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches. The knowledge and passion with which everyone has spoken is testament to the talent and commitment that exists in this House.

I feel incredibly privileged to be here, and I thank the people of Lewisham East for giving me this opportunity. I also thank Bridget Prentice, my predecessor. Her decision to step down at the last election came as a surprise to me, as it did to many. Anyone who knows Bridget will say that she is straight-talking, good-humoured but not-to-be-messed-with Glaswegian. As the Member of Parliament for Lewisham East since 1992, she was a fearsome advocate for our corner of south-east London. There is also huge respect for her here, as there is in the constituency, as a former Minister. She has been an enormous support to me over the past few months, and I thank her for her advice, encouragement and friendship.

When I was growing up, I never thought I would be a Member of Parliament. Yes, I thought I might be a PE teacher, or even a town planner, but not an MP. A trip down to the polling station every four or five years with my mum and dad was the limit of my political experience as a child, but I was brought up with a very strong sense of right and wrong, and a belief that with hard work and determination, I could do whatever I wanted. I am pleased that my mum and dad are here today and I thank them for all they have done for me. Given that they have sat here for seven hours, I should probably also thank them for their stamina.

I was very lucky to have a good comprehensive education, and even luckier to be a student when full grants allowed people from families such as mine to go to college without racking up enormous debts. I was lucky to have people close to me who wanted me to do well, and to complete a degree that nurtured my interest in the world around me and gave me the confidence to get on in life. It was the recognition of my own fortunate position and a desire to see the world a better place that led me into politics, to ensure that others had the opportunities that I had and to reduce the inequalities that still exist in our society. My brother often tells me to get off my high horse, but I have always wanted a job in which I can make a difference, so I guess it is no surprise that I should find myself here.

I am very proud to represent Lewisham East, which has been my home for the past eight years, and to represent a party that has brought about huge improvements in the lives of ordinary people, but I also know that my party has a significant challenge of renewal and revitalisation ahead of it. We need to listen to what voters across the

country are telling us, which is precisely what I plan to do in Lewisham East.

Like many others, my constituency is one of great contrasts, from the leafy streets of Blackheath and Lee Green, through multicultural Catford, and to the homes of Downham and Grove Park. Bisected by overland railway lines, my constituency has a history of welcoming people from different parts of the UK and, indeed, the world. In her book "The Wouldbegoods", E. Nesbit described Lewisham as a place where

"nothing happens unless you make it happen".

More than 100 years later, I can assure the House that the residents of Lewisham East make an awful lot happen.

Although we have areas of significant deprivation, we are not deprived of ambition or community spirit. I have been fortunate over the past few years to work with many of the groups that make our corner of London special, such as the tenants' leaders who set up Phoenix Community Housing, the Friends and Users of Staplehurst Road Shops, and the volunteers at the Rushey Green Time Bank. I could go on. I love living in Lewisham, but I also know that a lot needs to change. During the election, I met mums and dads who were concerned about violent crime and gang culture, commuters fed up with being stuck in someone's armpit on overcrowded trains, and people who were concerned about jobs and housing and were worried about the changes they have seen in their community, but most of all I met people who were anxious about the economy, and I shall now turn to that subject.

My predecessor spoke in her maiden speech in 1992 about the scourge of youth unemployment. She called for quality training schemes and job guarantees for young people who were affected by the recession of the early 1990s. Sadly, 18 years down the line I am in a similar position as a result of the new Government's determination to slash public spending. Axing the future jobs fund beggars belief. In Lewisham, this scheme has already created 133 jobs, with another 42 positions lined up. These are real people benefiting from real jobs, with real money going into their pockets, real experience of the workplace and real references being secured to help them get their next job. Civil servants in Westminster may tell Ministers that the scheme is not working, but I am not sure that my constituents would say the same.

Ensuring that the next generation have the right skills to access the jobs of the future is critical. Ensuring that the next generation want the jobs of the future, and believe they can get them is equally important. It never ceases to amaze me that while Canary Wharf is only a 15-